



Scottish Naming Customs

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Origins of Scottish Surnames

Surnames are said to have begun to be used by Scottish nobility at the direction of King Malcolm Ceannmor in about 1061. William L. Kirk, Jr. "Introduction to the Derivation of Scottish Surnames," Clan Macrae (1992), <http://www.clanmacrae.ca/documents/names.htm>

"In some Highland areas, though, fixed surnames did not become the norm until the 18th century, and in parts of the Northern Isles until the 19th century." "Surnames," ScotlandsPeople, <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/guides/surnames>

Types of Scottish Surnames

Location-Based Surnames

Some people were named for localities. For example, the surname "Murray from the lands of Moray, and Ogilvie, which, according to Black, derives from the barony of Ogilvie in the parish of Glamis, Angus. Tenants might in turn assume, or be given, the name of their landlord, despite having no kinship with him."

Sometimes surnames referred to a specific topographical feature of the landscape such as a river, a loch, a hill, etc. Some examples might include: Names that contain 'kirk' (as in Kirkland, or Selkirk) which means 'church' in Gaelic; 'Muir' or names that contain it (means 'moor' in Gaelic); A name which has 'Barr' in it (this means 'hilltop' in Gaelic).

"Surnames," ScotlandsPeople, <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/guides/surnames>

Occupational Surnames

A significant amount of surnames come from occupations. So a smith became known as Smith or Gow (Gaelic for smith), a tailor became Tailor/Taylor, a baker was Baxter, a weaver was Webster, etc.

"Surnames," ScotlandsPeople, <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/guides/surnames>

Descriptive Surnames

"Nicknames were 'descriptive' ie. they referred to a physical feature or characteristic or a personality trait.

Because in the early days many Scots had the same name, these nicknames were usually used to distinguish one 'Andrew' or 'Tahmas' from another. Over time many of these became surnames..."

"Surnames," ScotlandsPeople, <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/guides/surnames>

Surnames Indicating Ethnic Origins

Some well-known Scottish surnames actually indicate the place of origin or ethnicity of the emigrant ancestor.

Examples of Scottish surnames of ethnic origin:

Bremner – someone from Brabant

Fleming – referencing someone from Flanders

Galbraith – from the Gaelic “gall” (stranger) and “Breathnach” (Briton), meaning a Brython or Welsh speaker

Inglis – meaning English or someone from England

MacDougall – from MacDhubhghaill “son of Dhubhghall,” a certain type of Norseman

Scott – a descendant of the Scoti, the Irish tribe that invaded Scotland in the 5th century

Wallace – a Brython or Welshman

“Scotland Names Personal,” FamilySearch.org, https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Scotland_Names_Personal

Relational Surnames or Patronymics

“Many Scottish surnames originated in patronymics, whereby a son’s surname derived from the father’s forename, for example John Donaldson’s son might be Peter Johnson, whose son might be Magnus Peterson, and so on. Patronymics present something of a challenge for the family historian in that the surname changed with each successive generation.

This practice died out in Lowland Scotland after the 15th century, as patronymic surnames became permanent family names. It persisted, however, in the Highlands and Islands well into the 18th century (see Mac surnames) and in the Northern Isles until the 19th century.”

“Surnames,” ScotlandsPeople, <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/guides/surnames>

The Difference between the Lowland Scots and the Highland Scots:

“The Highland and Lowland areas had very different cultural practices, traditions, and even languages.”

Scottish patronymics involved a man’s first name with either a suffix or prefix tacked on.

Suffixes (added to the end of a name) were used more often by Lowland Scots, and prefixes (added before the name) were more popular with Highlanders.

Lowland Scot, using a suffix...

- Father's name is 'Andrew' (assuming that he only has one name at this point)
- Son's name is 'John' (again he only has one name)
- Using the patronymic formula, the suffix 'son' is added to the father's name and the son becomes known as John Andrewson (aka John, Andrew's son).

Over time, 'Andrewson' became 'Anderson', which is a very popular Scottish surname.

Highland Scot, using a prefix...

Father's name is Donald

Son's name is Craig

Using the patronymic formula, we add the prefix 'Mac' (from the Gaelic 'meic' which meant 'son of') to the father's name and the son becomes Craig MacDonald

"Your Guide To Scottish Surnames," Scottish-At-Heart.com, <http://www.scottish-at-heart.com/scottish-surnames.html>

Scottish Forenames/Givenames

In the early part of the Middle Ages, the name pools in Gaelic Scotland and Ireland were more or less the same, since the Gaels came to Scotland from Ireland and brought their names with them as they brought the Gaelic language. Sharon L. Krossa, "Quick and easy Gaelic Names," p. 2.

Scottish Naming Patterns

Parental Scottish Naming Pattern

The 1st son was named for his father's father

The 2nd son was named for his mother's father

The 3rd son was named for his father

The 4th son was named for his father's eldest brother

The 5th son was named for his father's next eldest brother

The 1st daughter was named for her mother's mother

The 2nd daughter was named for her father's mother

The 3rd daughter was named for her mother

The 4th daughter was named for her mother's eldest sister

The 5th daughter was named for her mother's next eldest sister

John Barrett Robb, "The Scottish Onomastic Child-naming Pattern" p. 3.

Ancestral Scottish Naming Pattern

The 1st son was named for his father's father

The 2nd son was named for his mother's father

The 3rd son was named for his father's father's father

The 4th son was named for his mother's mother's father

The 5th son was named for his father's mother's father

The 6th son was named for his mother's father's father

The 7th through 10th sons were named for their father's 4 great-grandfathers

The 11th through 14th sons were named for their mother's 4 great-grandfathers

John Barrett Robb, "The Scottish Onomastic Child-naming Pattern" p. 2.

Ancestral Scottish Naming Pattern

The 1st daughter was named for her mother's mother

The 2nd daughter was named for her father's mother

The 3rd daughter was named for her mother's father's mother

The 4th daughter was named for her father's father's mother

The 5th daughter was named for her mother's mother's mother

The 6th daughter was named for her father's mother's mother

The 7th through 10th daughters were named for their mother's 4 great-grandmothers

The 11th through 14th daughters were named for their father's 4 great-grandmothers

John Barrett Robb, "The Scottish Onomastic Child-naming Pattern" p. 2.

Anglicizing Gaelic Forenames

Parish registers in Gaelic-speaking areas of the Highlands and Western Isles often anglicized common Gaelic forenames like:

Hamish as James

Ian as John

Morag as Mary

"Forenames," ScotlandsPeople, <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/content/forenames>

Ambiguous Forenames

"Names that, today, we would normally associate with boys were occasionally (mainly in the North of Scotland) given to girls and vice versa ... Christian, viewed as a boy's name today, was quite a common girl's name in Scotland, and used as an alternative to Christina."

"Forenames," ScotlandsPeople, <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/content/forenames>

"Many boys' names were transformed into girls' names by adding **ina**, for example Thomasina, Georgina, Hughina, Jamesina, Williamina. These names might be abbreviated to Ina in later life. Williamina might become Mina."

"Forenames," ScotlandsPeople, <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/content/forenames>

Interchangeable and Various Spellings of Forenames

Some names are completely interchangeable, for example Agnes and Nancy, Donald and Daniel. Jane could be recorded as Jean, Jessie or Janet.

"Forenames," ScotlandsPeople, <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/content/forenames>

Early spellings may vary from later ones, for example Jannet, Jhonet, Jonat, Jonnet or Jonet instead of Janet, Margrat or Margret for Margaret, Henrie for Henry, Andro or Androw for Andrew, Alisoun, Alesoune, Alisone for Alison.

"Forenames," ScotlandsPeople, <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/content/forenames>

Most Common Forenames

Top Ten Male and Female Names in the 18th Century

| | |
|-----------|-----------|
| John | Margaret |
| William | Jean |
| Robert | Janet |
| James | Mary |
| Hugh | Elizabeth |
| Thomas | Agnes |
| Andrew | Ann |
| David | Marion |
| Alexander | Martha |
| Matthew | Isabel |

Alice Crook, "Personal Names in 128th-Century Scotland: A Case Study of the Parish of Beith (North Ayrshire)," **The Journal of Scottish Name Studies** 6 (2012): 4.

Top Ten Male and Female Names in 1900

| | |
|-----------|-----------|
| John | Mary |
| James | Margaret |
| William | Elizabeth |
| Robert | Annie |
| Alexander | Jane |
| George | Agnes |
| Thomas | Isabella |
| David | Catherine |
| Charles | Helen |

"Top 100 names in Scotland 1900," British Baby Names, <http://www.britishbabynames.com/blog/2013/01/top-100-names-in-scotland-1900.html>

Websites about Scottish Forenames

Behind the Name - <https://www.behindthename.com/names/usage/scottish>

Feminine Names in Scottish Records - <http://heraldry.sca.org/names/scottishfem.html>

Popular Scottish Boy Names - <http://www.scottish-at-heart.com/scottish-boy-names.html>

PopularScottishForenames - http://www.rampantscotland.com/forenames/blnames_index.htm

Scottish First Names - <http://www.namenerds.com/scottish/lists.html>

Scottish Girl Names – <http://www.scottish-at-heart.com/scottish-girl-names.html>

Remember:

There are various types of surnames that could offer clues

Location-Based Surnames

Occupational Surnames

Descriptive Surnames

Surnames Indicating Ethnic Origins

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Websites about Scottish Forenames

#FHLWebinars

#FamilyHistoryLibrary

#Scotch-IrishResearch